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AUTHOR	Gonzalez-Jensen, Margarita; Beckett, E. Carol
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ABSTRACT

Development of reading skills for all second language learners is of utmost importance for success in all academic areas. Reading skills assessment must guide instructional planning for English language learners. This manuscript examines the reading assessment practices used by 50 inservice K-8 elementary English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers in a large metropolitan area in the southwest United States. The findings indicated that many teachers did not differentiate between formal and informal assessment practices in their classrooms, did not regularly assess the English language learners' (ELLs') reading growth, and did not differentiate reading assessment practices for fluent English speakers and ELLs. Conclusions from this study include the need for effective preservice and inservice opportunities to increase awareness of the effectiveness of reading assessment in planning instruction. Colleges of education need to consider ways to improve ESL teachers' basic conceptual understanding of assessment and provide them opportunities to refine practices of administering the appropriate reading assessments. (Contains 18 references.) (Author/SM)

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How Teachers Assess ESL *Reading*:

Implications for Change

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E. Carol Beckett

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Margarita Gonzalez-Jensen, Ed.D., Associate Professor

E. Carol Beckett, Ed.D., Assistant Professor

College of Education/MC 3151
Arizona State University West
P. O. Box 47100
Phoenix, AZ 85069-7100
Phone: (602) 543-6368
Email: carol.beckett@asu.edu

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Abstract

Development of reading skills for all second language learners is of utmost importance for success in all academic areas. Reading skills assessment must guide instructional planning for English language learners. This manuscript examines the reading assessment practices used by 50 in-service K-8 elementary ESL teachers in a large metropolitan area in the Southwest United States. The findings indicated many teachers did not differentiate between formal and informal assessment practices in their classrooms, did not regularly assess the English language learners' (ELLs) reading growth, and did not differentiate reading assessment practices for fluent English speakers and ELLs. Conclusions from the study include the need for effective pre-service and in-service opportunities to increase awareness of the effectiveness of reading assessment in planning instruction. Colleges of education need to consider ways to improve ESL teachers' basic conceptual understanding of assessment and provide them opportunities to refine practices of administering the appropriate reading assessments.

How Teachers Assess ESL Reading: Implications for Change

Public education for students who are English language learners (ELLs) has never faced a more critical time. English language learning programs are under attack in many states. At the same time, academic standards specifying grade level competencies for elementary and high school students have been adopted by every state. What students should know and be able to do is at the forefront of concerns. ELLs are especially vulnerable when decisions are made that have an affect on educational opportunities. Many states have policies in place mandating decisions about students' promotion to the next grade level or even graduation from high school based on test scores (Holmes & Duron, n. d.). Concurrently, there is also public demand for more teacher accountability for whether or not students show achievement on mandated tests (Zoch, n. d.; Bradley, 1999).

The Council of Chief State School Officers stated that ELLs success in school depends on gaining access to effective second language learning opportunities in order to take advantage of a full educational program (CCSSO, 1992 in Short, 1993). ELLs' access to a full educational program means providing effective assessments and instruction in English reading. ELLs access to a full educational program means providing effective assessments and instruction in English reading. Therefore, a teacher's ability to assess reading performance in order to plan effective instruction for ELLs must be examined. ELLs need teachers who will make reading a key focus in their instructional program (Schmitt & Carter, 2000).

Development of reading skills is of utmost importance for success in all areas of academic content. Chamot and O'Malley state that ELLs need to practice reading a variety of kinds of information. Examples are science information, mathematics word problems, maps and charts in geography, biographies in history, and stories and poems in literature (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994).

ELLs need teachers who are accomplished at determining their students' reading learning needs through effective use of assessment strategies so as to avoid lost opportunities to plan effective instructions (Gersten, 1999).

The purpose of this paper is to: a) describe current assessment practices in assessment of ELLs' reading skills, and b) present the results of a survey of elementary teachers enrolled in classes leading to an English as a second language (ESL) endorsement to teach ELLs in Arizona.

Assessment Impacts Instruction

Reading is one of the most important areas that ELLs need to master for success in the mainstream English language classroom. Assessment of students' reading abilities is a way to measure achievement and to guide and improve instruction (Carrasquillo & Rodriguez, 1996). Many other researchers agree that in order for students to become proficient readers of English, teachers must have adequate information about their students' reading skills so that informed instruction can be provided in the needed skill areas (Ervin, 1998; Hancock, 1994; Checkley, 1997; Spangenberg-Ubschat & Prichard, 1994; Tierney & Readence, 2000).

Researchers who specialize in instructional practices for English language learners and their development have noted the need of ongoing reading assessment for decades. For example, Thonis stated in 1976,

> Evaluation is concerned with such questions as: What have we taught; what have pupils learned; and how do we know...? Unless evaluation occurs on a regular basis teachers are apt to have spent a great deal of teaching time without knowing if they make a difference in the lives of their students" (pp 213-214).

Twenty years later, in 1995, Krashen voiced the same belief in the need for assessment stating that tests have a "huge impact on classroom behavior" and that the instructional value has greater importance than measuring student progress (p. 177).

Assessment of ELLs Reading skills

Most school districts assess ELLs' English proficiency using standardized tests. Law & Eckes (1995) reported the language proficiency tests most commonly used include the Language Assessment Scales (LAS), Woodcock-Muñoz Language Survey (WMLS), and the Ideal Proficiency Test (IPT). These instruments contain components for assess oral, reading and writing skills so that an overall view of language skills can be obtained. Although standardized tests such as the LAS, IPT, and WMLS are somewhat limited in the information obtained as far as lesson planning is concerned, teachers are able to obtain a comprehensive picture of students' English language abilities that directly interface with development of literacy skills.

The Study

The authors' concern for the state of ELLs' reading instruction grew when we coupled the perceived lack of classroom reading assessment with the practice whereby ELLs are excluded from district and state testing in Arizona for a specified period of time. Moreover, the authors wanted to find out what preparation ESL teachers were receiving in assessing reading growth.

Our goal was to determine what type of reading assessment was occurring in ELLs' classrooms, particularly the current practices of ELLs' teachers within a large metropolitan area in the Southwest United States. In order to accomplish our goal we asked teachers taking classes required for an ESL endorsement to complete a survey about the reading skills of both their fluent English speaking and non-fluent English language learners regarding the type and manner of reading assessment that were regularly performed in their classrooms. The participants were also asked to gauge the degree of satisfaction they

felt when using different types of reading assessments and to reflect on the type of specific information gathered from assessment that would improve their reading instruction.

Participants

Fifty in-service K-8 elementary teachers taking ESL endorsement classes as required by the State of Arizona participated in the study. The ESL endorsement is required of teachers who teach large numbers of ELLs in their classrooms or are preparing to do so. Forty-three of the teachers had Bachelors' degrees in education, including twenty-six in regular elementary, three in Special Education, four in Bilingual, four in ESL and six with combined degrees. Of the remaining seven teachers with Masters' degrees, four specified the type of Masters' degree they held. Three were in Elementary Education and one was in Special Education.

The teachers responding to the survey represented a wide range of levels of experience. Twenty-five, or half, of the respondents were new teachers whose experience ranged from 0 to 5 years, while the other half of the teachers reported wider ranges of experience, from 6 to 28 years.

Although the teachers participating in the study lived and taught in an area of the country where most ELLs were Spanish speakers, more than half of the respondents reported having more than one language group represented in their classes. One teacher reported having a total of nineteen ELLs who spoke six different languages.

Type of Analysis

This preliminary study, conducted with a questionnaire of open-ended questions, yielded highly varied answers and the participants did not respond to all the items. Therefore, given the number and type of responses, the authors performed a formative evaluation by analyzing participants' responses using percentages and descriptive data wherever possible.

Findings

Formal Assessment

In Arizona the legislature requires districts to administer yearly formal reading assessments of students as components of a standardized test. For example, the Stanford Achievement Test 9, Ninth Edition (SAT 9) is given all students in grades one through nine annually although other assessments can also be administered. The questionnaire asked participants to report all formal reading assessments they administered in their classrooms to all students.

The participants named the SAT 9, district assessment plans, language proficiency tests such as the IPT and LAS, and criterion referenced tests (CRT) as instruments used for measuring children's reading skills. Published basal tests and teacher-made CRTs that measure specific skill mastery such as identifying the main idea and sequencing were also listed. The responses indicated the teachers used the same assessments for all students regardless of English language proficiency.

Informal Assessment

When asked about informal assessments, participants named strategies as widely dissimilar as: flashcards with pictures, book reports, observation, letter and sound correspondence, oral reading, daily work, group activities, and discussions for both ELLs and fluent English speaking (FES) students. Publisher material such as program placement tests and primary language level tests were also listed as means to determine reading levels for English language learners. Interestingly, only one teacher indicated using running records as a means to informally assess reading growth.

Frequency of Assessment

The participants reported varying frequency rates of formal assessment for both the FES and the ELLs. While most teachers indicated the use of yearly SAT 9 assessment, twelve teachers

reported conducting FES reading assessments four times a year. Ten teachers reported testing four times a year for ELLs students. Other time intervals for formal assessment for all children included bi-weekly, tri-weekly, and bi-annually. Eight teachers stated they formally assessed reading skills for ELLs every two years.

Frequency rates for informal reading assessments for all students were the same as the frequency rates for formal assessments. As with formal assessments, administering informal assessments appeared to be an individual teacher decision with answers ranging from "on going" to "as often as needed" to "once a year".

Degree of Satisfaction with Assessment

Overall participants indicated greater satisfaction levels with information obtained from informal assessments for ELLs. Ten of the fifty, or 20%, of the participants reported satisfaction with formal assessments for ELLs while thirty, or 60%, of the participants indicated satisfaction with information obtained from the informal assessments.

Several of the participants gave written comments to explain their answers. Teachers who were satisfied with their procedures seemed to have a clear sense of assessment by adding comments such as: "Yes, but never completely," "only if used with teacher evaluations," and "yes, I only use it to jump-start the year."

The comments from the teachers who were dissatisfied with assessments lacked specificity in their concerns. Some of their comments included: "No, because they don't show growth," and "I need to look at various aspects of child's reading." One respondent vented her dissatisfaction by stating that, "attempting formal reading skill assessment for ELLs students is inappropriate."

Information needed for effective instruction

The respondents were asked what information they needed in order to teach reading more effectively; specifically, what might help ELLs grow and develop in English language reading. Very few teachers responding to this question identified needing information about reading skills, citing concerns such as smaller class sizes and more help as the key to more effective, [sic] individualized reading instruction. Those teachers who responded about reading skills cited generic although compelling needs such as wanting more information on students' first language skills, more information on phonics, decoding, sight vocabulary and comprehension.

When asked what type of assessment would be ideal for helping teachers more fully understand the ELLs' performance levels twenty-one of the fifty (42%) participants indicated they wanted information about first language reading skills, recognizing the importance of first language skills in learning to read in a second language. Eight teachers wanted some type of multiple assessment (IRI or running records listed by two) and information on the transition process from first language to second language.

Discussion & Implications

Gee (1999) states that students learning English must have support if they are to become proficient readers. The importance of reading assessment as part of the support system cannot be understated. The teachers in our study were performing reading assessments although not all had differentiated between formal and informal reading assessment. A further generalization of our findings, and one that possibly results from the previous understanding indicates the majority of the teachers are satisfied with the results of both types of assessments.

We are concerned however, about the apparent lack of knowledge of informal reading assessments on the part of some respondents, since these informal assessment techniques can be very valuable in ascertaining students' reading levels and or reading strengths and weaknesses.

Only two teachers cited use of informal reading inventories, miscue analysis, and running records to ascertain reading skills of their students and one teacher requested information about running records. Training on reading assessment issues may not have occurred as yet in the coursework for many respondents as the survey was given in required classes preparing teachers to work with ELLs. One teacher commented verbally that assessment had not been a focus in undergraduate reading classes.

While Arizona mandates standardized testing of reading along with other academic skill areas, students learning English are either excluded from this testing for their first year in public schools or their test results are not included in published assessment data. Many ESL teachers do not receive feedback on reading competencies for those students. Therefore, this lack of information may lead teachers to believe that reading assessment is not an issue until students reach a high degree of English fluency.

Further, the teachers reported no recognizable pattern for coordination or regular scheduling of reading assessment for districts or schools. This can be interpreted to mean that regularly scheduled reading assessment for ELLs is not included as part of ESL curriculum in many participants' schools and districts.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The following tentative conclusions seem justified given the results of this study. The teachers reported they do not regularly schedule reading assessment for English language learners. They cited the following reasons for this practice:

- Lack of help.
- Large class sizes make it difficult to do.
- Emphasis on standardized tests creates a lack of focus on reading assessment.

- Misinformation about the need to assess reading skills until the students are fluent in English.

There was a lack of common focus on systematically scheduled testing as well. Testing intervals for FES students varied from four times a year with CRTs to once a year with the SAT 9. Testing intervals for ELLs varied from once or twice a year to "the same as" for FES students. These responses seem to imply respondents' schools and districts allow teachers a certain amount of freedom in determining the need for reading assessment.

Many teachers appeared to be unsure of the appropriateness or utility of some of the informal types of assessment such as running-records, individual conferencing, and miscue analysis. As a result, the authors believe the teachers are inadvertently limiting the English language learners' reading support system by not incorporating the needed diagnostic information that effective reading assessment can provide.

Perhaps one way to impact change in reading assessment practices as reported in this study would be to review the teacher training programs' offering in the area of assessment. This review should include not only the pre-service course offerings but also the in-service course or workshop offerings on the topic. Pre-service teachers generally take an assessment course that presents the important differences between formal and informal assessment (e.g. standardized testing, criterion referenced tests, etc.) and how data obtained from each can help teachers provide appropriate instruction. While necessary assessment issues for all teachers, the courses do not typically include issues surrounding oral and literacy development of ELLs.

We recommend that courses designed specifically for teachers working with ELLs contain content specific assessment issues. For example, a literacy course should include content on reading and writing assessment such as miscue analysis, running records, and writing criteria

rubrics. An ELL literacy course would address the same topics but specify how second language reading issues must be considered when administering and scoring such assessments. Other program specific courses, such as an ESL methodology course or a language arts course should also infuse assessment concerns and practices.

Individual schools and districts need to provide ELLs' teachers and staff with effective, on-going in-service opportunities that link reading assessment to instruction. Based on the information reported by the teachers, it is obviously a need that should be addressed with new and veteran ELL teachers alike.

In conclusion, the authors believe assessment of ELLs' reading skills must become a priority in teacher training practices. Colleges of education must include a strong component on assessment practices that guide instruction in reading methods classes. Giving teachers the opportunity to acquire skills in administering reading assessments will improve their basic conceptual understanding of this necessary instructional tool. Becoming effective practitioners of appropriate reading assessment administration and analyzers of the results thereof will make ELL students the ultimate beneficiaries.

Caveats

The authors believe there were four areas of caution within this preliminary study that might have impacted the results. First, the nature of the questionnaire, with open-ended questions, left too much room for interpretation. Participants may not have totally understood exactly what information the authors were looking for. Secondly, the participants may have lacked the active vocabulary necessary to give a precise response, or perhaps were not able to recall specific test names. A third caution relates to the amount of time that was allotted to answer the questionnaire. Since the study was conducted in the Fall and Spring semesters during graduate class sessions, the

time given by the professors to read and answer the questions varied. Therefore, the potential for inconsistent results exists. Although the study did provide useful information about ELL teachers' reading assessment practices, future investigations should include control for these types of inconsistencies.

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Margarita González-Jensen, Associate Professor of Bilingual Education at Arizona State University West, teaches ESL methodology and bireading courses at the graduate and undergraduate levels. Dr. González- Jensen has many years of teaching and administrative experience, is interested in bireading pedagogy and is also an author of bilingual children's literature.

E. Carol Beckett , Assistant Professor of ESL in the College of Education at Arizona State University West, teaches ESL methodology courses in reading, mathematics, and science for Bilingual and ESL graduates and undergraduates. Dr.Beckett has extensive experience in administration, special education and teaching experience in many areas of bilingual education.

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Printed Name/Position/Title: E. Carol Beckett, Asst Prof.

Organization/Address: College of Education/MC 3151
Arizona State University West
4701 W Thunderbird, Phoenix, AZ 85069-7100

Telephone: 602-543-6368

FAX: 602-543-6350

E-Mail Address: carol.beckett@asu.edu

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